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## Refugees Risk Coming Home to an Unready Iraq

By [CARA BUCKLEY](#)

BAGHDAD — The widow Hashim crossed the border into [Iraq](#) from Syria at dusk last month, heading homeward as the sun set behind her and the sky ahead grew dark.

Her dwindling savings had bought her family passage aboard a crowded bus, but there was no telling what awaited her at journey's end. The only sure thing was that she would have to look for a new home and a job in a city starved for work and crudely reshaped by war.

Four weeks later, Maha Hashim is sharing her uncle's musty two-bedroom apartment with her four children, sister-in law and four nieces and nephews, in the once tortured Baghdad neighborhood around Haifa Street. She has vowed not to stay long, but has no job and cannot afford an apartment of her own. Her husband, a policeman, was killed by insurgents in mid-2006, and her old house in southern Baghdad was destroyed by a truck bomb. Her old neighborhood, Saydia, remains one of most dangerous in the capital.

"I loved Saydia but I can never go back; it broke my heart," said Ms. Hashim, 40, a Sunni. "I need to get a job and a home, but how, and where?"

Tens of thousands of returning refugees face similar uncertainties throughout Iraq, where the government's inability to manage the uneven reverse exodus has left the most vulnerable in an uneasy, potentially explosive limbo.

The government's widely publicized plan to run free buses from Damascus, Syria, to Baghdad was suspended after just two runs. Thousands of Sunni refugees get no aid

because they fear registering with the Shiite-led government. While aid organizations are distributing emergency packets that include utensils, blankets and food, deeper structural issues, like securing neighborhoods, supplying housing and creating jobs, remain unresolved and largely unaddressed.

A small fraction of the millions of refugees who fled Iraq have come back. While the government trumpeted their return as proof of newfound security, migration experts said most of them were forced back by expired visas and depleted savings. Ms. Hashim, for one, pawned her wedding ring and gold jewelry to stay in Syria, but came back after her uncle's visa application was denied.

The American military has expressed deep concerns about the Iraqi government's ability to feed and house its returnees, or manage people who wish to reclaim their homes. It is widely feared that property disputes or efforts to return to newly homogenized neighborhoods could set off fresh waves of sectarian attacks.

For most [Iraqi refugees](#), the trip home is just the beginning of their troubles. Many return to find their homes destroyed or filled with squatters, most of them displaced people themselves. But the government committee that decides property disputes is charged with hearing only cases that predate the invasion of 2003.

“We urgently need a plan; the whole government needs to be involved,” said Hamdiya A. Najaf, an official with the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration. Her ministry is overloaded with property dispute cases from [Saddam Hussein](#)'s time, when thousands were forcibly relocated. “We're still working on the old problems,” she said. “We don't have the mechanism to solve the new ones.”

The brewing housing crisis extends to millions who abandoned their homes but stayed in Iraq. In Baghdad alone, more than 300,000 people left one neighborhood for

another, as Sunnis fled to the west and Shiites to the east, often moving into recently evacuated houses.

Afraah Kadhom's family is among the uprooted. She is 36, and usually shrouded in a billowing black abaya, a symbol of mourning. Her father and four brothers were killed two years ago when gunmen broke through the doors to the family's house in Huriya, a neighborhood in north central Baghdad, and methodically hunted the men down. One of her brother's sons, Mustafa, cradled his father's head as the man lay dying. Mustafa, who is 9 now and shy, is the oldest surviving male member of the family. "The man of our house," Ms. Kadhom said.

The family stayed in Huriya until last December, when armed Shiite militiamen swept through, routing more than 100 Sunni families, including Ms. Kadhom's. Ms. Kadhom and her relatives fled to Ghazaliya, in western Baghdad, where an imam found them an apartment belonging to a Shiite family that had left for eastern Baghdad.

The government has aid programs that could help Ms. Kadhom, but she views them with deep suspicion. To apply for the food program, for example, she would have to return to Huriya to unregister the family with the local council, but she is desperately afraid of going there.

Iraq's internally displaced are entitled to 150,000 dinars, or \$123, a month from the government. But Ms. Kadhom also worries that the Shiite-dominated government would punish her if she applied. Her pride is also a factor. Ms. Kadhom's father was a sheik. The family was used to giving alms, not asking for them.

If the apartment's owners come back, Ms. Kadhom's family will have nowhere to go. Three weeks after her family fled, its house was bombed and the rubble bulldozed away.

"The Shiites who moved into the homes near our property in Huriya, they will kill us if we go back," she said.

The housing situation in Baghdad resembles a fraught game of musical chairs. Some displaced people are renting refugees' homes; others moved in secretly or by force. Still others, like Ms. Kadhom and Ms. Hashim, have nowhere to move back to, either because their homes are gone or their neighborhoods are unsafe. And as refugees return in greater numbers, and find strangers, especially strangers from a different sect, living in their homes, security gains here could be erased.

"If these people become desperate, we're going back to square one," said Dr. Said Hakki, director of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society. "The Iraqi government is aware of it and so is General Petraeus's office," he said, referring to Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), the top American commander here.

Yet the American forces here have emphasized repeatedly that they do not want to get involved in property disputes, and the Iraqi government appears to be ignoring calls from its own ranks to step up the appeals process.

Ms. Najaf, the migration official, said she had been pleading with government ministers to create an emergency plan to rebuild homes and tackle recent property disputes. She says only the prime minister, [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#), has the power to find a solution. But she has had trouble even reaching him by phone.

“Iraqis by nature can be nervous, easily agitated,” she said. “If they see another person in their homes, who knows what will happen next. All Iraqis have pistols.”

Local courts offer the only official means of settling the more recent property disputes. But migration officials say that they are backlogged and move at a glacial pace, and that in any event their decisions are rarely enforced. The responsibility for resolving property disputes, those few that are addressed, often falls to city council members or tribal sheiks.

Dhia’ a al-Dien, 42, an engineer, leads the local council in the area of Haifa Street where Ms. Hashim and her family now live. Haifa Street used to be one of the most turbulent neighborhoods in Baghdad, and its middle class fled as kidnappings and mob-style street killings soared.

When squatters descended on some apartments, Mr. Dien said he felt helpless. “They were displaced from other neighborhoods. I felt pity for some of them. Others had weapons, the invaders. There was such chaos.”

Mr. Dien said he had been able to negotiate the return process for the handful of owners who have reclaimed their buildings. Some of the squatters left; others agreed to pay rent. But hundreds of the apartments’ owners have yet to return, and he fears getting stuck in the middle when they do.

“There’s no one helping us negotiate the return,” he said, shaking his head. “The Americans are telling us that we’ve got to negotiate between each other, because it’s not their business. But the Iraqi government said it’s not their business either.”

*Mudhafer al-Husaini, Qais Mizher and Balen Y. Younis contributed reporting.*